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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

VOLUME XXXIII

FEBRUARY, 1909

NUMBER 2

Editorial

THE ESSENTIAL UNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

IS THERE A COMMON CHRISTIAN DOGMATIC?

It is frequently assumed that a body of well-defined and generally accepted doctrines lies at the basis of Christianity, but when one attempts to discover the content of this fundamental belief he soon finds himself in perplexity. This was the situation of a correspondent who recently asked the *Outlook* to furnish him a brief and simple statement of the principal points involved in the Protestant faith. He supposed that Protestants agree in their opinions about the following items: (1) The creation of matter and of life, (2) God's special choice of Israel, (3) The significance of Old Testament prophecy, (4) The dual personality of Christ, (5) Miracles, (6) The atonement, (7) The greater intimacy of God's relation to men in the past than in the present, (8) God's requirements of men in the way of belief, (9) The eternal life toward which the New Testament points. The *Outlook* considered it entirely impracticable to attempt the proposed statement, inasmuch as any definitions that might be given would seem to some Christians erroneous and to others inadequate.

This lack of unity in belief is not wholly a modern affair, as is sometimes supposed. It has characterized Christianity from the first. Paul lived almost constantly in an atmosphere of doctrinal controversy, and during the centuries that followed, as new circumstances arose and men of different temperaments and training embraced the new faith, questions of belief continued to be disputed. To be sure, creeds were framed time and again, and theologians frequently elaborated systems of doctrine, but these facts merely testify to the pervasive element of unrest. Yet it is remarkable, when one

reflects upon it, that after all these years no body of uniformly accepted tenets has been formulated. While certain individuals may have definitely settled the content of their own faith, no judiciously minded person would presume to dictate to all Christendom the exact content of belief from which no one may subtract and to which no one may add; and if he should be so bold it would still be a fact that many would not agree with him. Anyone acquainted with the actual situation must confess that the *Outlook's* correspondent was altogether wrong in supposing that Protestant Christians agree in the main upon the points he outlined. In fact it can scarcely be said that there is absolute agreement upon any one of the nine items mentioned, and this is not only true of the Protestant body at large but frequently the disagreements are to be found within the narrower circle of the same communion.

HOW EXPLAIN DIVERSITY IN BELIEFS?

What is the explanation of this situation, and what its significance? One of the principal causes of variety in theological opinion is, no doubt, the Protestant principle of the independence of the individual; and doctrine is, in its last analysis, a matter of individual opinion. It is true that there have been certain leaders in religious thought from time to time, but later generations have not always walked in the path which their predecessors have blazed out but have struck out new ways for themselves guided by the dictates of their own conscience, or perhaps rather by the formative influences surrounding them and the measure of their own intellectual industry. Hence it is unwise to attach great importance to the desirability of uniformity in dogma, as though the essentials of our religion belonged in this sphere. It is desirable that Christians have opinions—the most intelligent and worthy opinions attainable—but the possession of a common vital religion cannot be conditioned by identity of beliefs, for the principle of independent personality makes absolute uniformity impossible.

This diversity of personal bias is well illustrated in the importance variously attached to certain practical phases of Christian life. Some persons put the chief emphasis upon feeling. Religion is for them primarily a sublime emotion which stimulates and regulates all matters of thought and conduct, and any diminution of emotion means a corresponding loss of religion. Others ask, What must we *do* to be

saved? They take action to be the thing of vital importance, and religion becomes the noblest form of duty. Still others make an intellectual comprehension of truth central. These different points of emphasis are really due to individual inclination, and in no one of the three types do we find that which is fundamentally distinctive in the common faith. The noblest in emotion, the worthiest in conduct, and the best in intellectual life are all legitimate factors in Christianity, but they are, as it were, its outer garments and not its throbbing heart. If there is any substantial uniformity in our religion it must rest upon something more stable than either our doctrinal convictions or our several opinions of the most important practical phase of Christianity.

WHAT IS THE TESTIMONY OF EARLY HISTORY?

Since Christianity is a historic religion it is natural to look to its beginning for its essential content. By critical study of its historical origin as recorded in the New Testament may we hope to find its permanent and fundamental elements? It is sometimes supposed that in this way certain assured results in doctrine can be established. During the last half century critical study has contributed much toward a more intelligent understanding of Christian origins, but a complete constructive summary of irreducible facts is still a desideratum. The data are of such a character that they will not serve as a solvent for all doubts, and the numerous lacunae in the records make comprehensive knowledge of details impossible and invite the exercise of imagination—a temptation which few investigators are able to resist. It does not seem probable that definite limits will soon be set to the exact historical content of the beginnings of Christianity, much less will critical investigation, though conducted never so thoroughly, be able to establish a uniform system of Christian dogmatics.

But this historical study does teach us one noteworthy lesson, namely, in Jesus' thought religion was not primarily a theory but it was a life. It was not chiefly a scheme of reflections about things external but was the realization of a spiritual force within—the religious ideal, instead of being an objective standard for mere contemplation and reverence, became a vital motive power in the experience of the individual. Thus it happened that Jesus' own personality took

precedence over his system of teaching in the thought of his followers. The spirit of his life mastered them, while his teaching suffered considerable remodeling under the influence of their own peculiar ideas. Of course Jesus also had his own opinions, and many of them were doubtless bounded by the narrow horizon of his day, but how insignificant are these things compared with his vital spiritual principles!

IN WHAT RESPECT CAN ESSENTIAL UNITY BE CLAIMED?

Now Christianity is professedly the religion which Jesus founded, and to him therefore we naturally look for such elements in it as may be called essential and characteristic. From this standpoint it would seem that the unifying element must be sought ultimately in the realm of the Christian life—in personal lives lived in loyalty to the religious ideals of Jesus and in spiritual fellowship with the Father whom he revealed. In this, and perhaps in this only, lies the possibility of a unified Christendom. The distinguishing mark of the Christian, in this non-partizan sense, is not adherence to a fixed dogma, nor membership in a particular organization, but a life dominated by the spirit of Jesus. This does not mean that there may not be theological differences among Christians, or that denominational lines of cleavage will at once disappear, for these may be expected to exist as long as diversity of personal characteristics persists. Nor is it practicable to attempt to formulate, as a doctrinal scheme for general acceptance, a composite of Jesus' opinions. Indeed, to be out of harmony with some of his views is not necessarily a denial of his spirit. For instance, if one were to believe, as many think they must, that Jesus did not entertain the idea of gentile missions one need still feel no inconsistency in claiming to be a sincere follower of the Master, because Jesus' fundamental principle of love is the motor nerve of all missionary activity.

Thus our common Christian faith may assume different forms as its content is objectivized by different types of men, and it may be made to serve different functions according to the individual needs of the believer, but beneath all is the fundamental unifying fact of personal religious life dominated more or less perfectly by the spirit and ideals of Jesus—a life of trustful fellowship with God lived in obedience to the divine will and in devotion to the cause of humanity.